

Which Bucks are Dominant and why you should Care

Let me first explain what I mean by dominant. For purposes of this article I am referring to Bucks that exhibit control and influence over other Bucks in the same area. As a result of this they will be able to claim or establish their own territory. Also, they are more likely to breed does as they come into estrous. Notice I used the words more likely and *not* definitely. As with everything there are always exceptions. The lesser Bucks seem to exhibit fear of the more dominant Bucks. To be more precise let me say this. Prior to the rut the lesser Bucks seem to show respect for the more dominant Bucks and as the rut gets closer then they seem to fear them. I guess if I was worried about getting my butt kicked I would be a little scared too. Just prior to the rut and during the rut if you see some Bucks together it is very noticeable which Buck is being treated as the boss. A dominant Buck won't tolerate another Buck getting too close to himself or especially his doe.

I remember when I first started deer hunting I just assumed that the Buck with the biggest antlers was the dominant Buck and did all of the breeding. I soon learned that this was a misconception. As a result of spending thousands of hours afield during the pre-rut, rut and post rut I want to share what we have learned about what makes a Buck a dominant Buck. Because we shoot such a small percentage of the Bucks that we see we are afforded the opportunity to observe and sometimes get video of many different Bucks both young and old. It is always interesting to see two Bucks confront each other but based on what we see most of the time one Buck will back down before an actual fight ensues. This may be because the dominance has been previously determined or one of the Bucks just doesn't want to fight.

I believe there is a combination of traits that make a Buck a dominant Buck. I haven't listed these in any particular order but I believe attitude does play a big part.

These traits are as follows:

- 1. Attitude**
- 2. Body Size (including Strength & Endurance)**
- 3. Antler size or characteristics**
- 4. Age**

Let's talk about each of the above traits.

Attitude: Have you ever been in a public place like a bar, concert, ballgame, school, park, etc. and seen a smaller guy get obnoxious with a guy that is much bigger than he is. I watched a 140lb guy with a bad attitude confront a 230lb linebacker looking guy and the bigger guy simply walked away. This is what I mean by attitude. Just as dogs can have different temperaments I believe deer can have different temperaments as well. At least once each season I will see a Buck that is bigger in body size simply move away from a Buck that is smaller in body size to avoid a confrontation. I used to scratch my head over this because I was certain the bigger bodied Buck could have easily won the fight. I'm not necessarily referring to a 5 ½ year old or older Buck that backed down. They may have both been 3 ½ years old.

As fall approaches and the days shorten the Bucks testosterone levels increase and his attitude is certainly going to change. I just believe that in addition to the influence that testosterone has the Buck has his own underlying character or personality. (Like the linebacker looking guy above)

Body size: If you have two Bucks that decide to start a pushing match and possibly even an all out fight, a much heavier Buck may have the advantage. I'm not talking about a small weight advantage. I'm talking about a large weight advantage. Since we have some Bucks that max out at 140lbs and some Bucks that max out over 220lbs there can be a decided weight advantage with some of our Bucks. The smaller Buck will usually back out of the confrontation but if he has a bad attitude like we talked about above then he may end up being killed in the fight. Or if he possesses more strength and/or endurance maybe he'll wear down the bigger Buck if he doesn't back down.

Antler Size: I can't tell you if a Buck freaks out like we hunters do when he sees a huge set of antlers on another Buck but when you see a 4 ½ year old Buck back away from a younger Buck with huge antlers that is smaller in body size it sure makes you wonder. In addition to just big antlers I'm sure you've seen a Buck or seen pictures of a Buck with weird antlers. I am referring to an antler characteristic that may give this Buck a distinct advantage in a fight. He may have extremely narrow and tall antlers that may fit inside of a more normal rack. He may have extremely long brow tines. He may have some non typical growth that will penetrate the head of another Buck when they clash antlers. We've had some Bucks with some crazy looking spikes coming off of their beams or their skulls. So what I'm saying is if two Bucks do decide to fight or even spar certain antler characteristics just might allow one of them to hurt the other even if that other Buck is bigger in body size. This may help this unusual or weird antlered Buck to become a dominant Buck.

Age: I wish we could say that with each year of age a Buck becomes more dominant but it's not that simple. In most cases the 2 ½ year old Buck will probably be dominant over the 1 ½ year old Buck. Also in most cases the 3 ½ year old Buck will be dominant over the 2 ½ year old Buck but attitude and body size can certainly make an exception to this. When it comes to 4 ½ year old and older Bucks the other factors really come into play. Age alone will probably not be the deciding factor of dominance. Each season we have a couple of 4 ½ year old Bucks that we let walk. We usually have the opportunity to observe and/or video them during the season. These Bucks are usually pretty big in body size but most importantly have big antlers. They usually show the signs of being the dominant Buck. We see them running off other Bucks and standing guard by their doe. We also see them spending most of their time on a certain area of our property. This indicates to us that they have claimed their territory. On the other hand we occasionally see some 3 ½ year old Bucks that push away some older Bucks. The other traits that I described above are definitely a contributing factor to this.

As I have said in many of my other articles we all need to analyze our own properties because each property or area will probably be different with regards to the various factors within its deer

population. The age structure of the Buck population in your area can influence which Bucks are dominant. If your area has a high percentage of its yearling Bucks harvested each season then you will have a very young age structure with your Bucks. As a result of this you may not have very many older Bucks in your area. A 2 ½ year old Buck may be dominant simply because he is the oldest Buck in your area. On the other hand if you have a good percentage of older Bucks in your area then the factors described above will certainly come into play. With regards to breeding being done mostly by the dominant Bucks the Doe to Buck ratio in your area can affect which Bucks will actually breed. A high Doe to Buck ratio may enable a higher percentage of non dominant and yearling Bucks to breed whereas a tight Doe to Buck ratio may limit the amount of breeding done by non dominant and yearling Bucks.

So why should you care if a Buck is dominant or not. If you've read my other articles then you know that we are continuously trying to improve our hunting. If you simply shoot any Buck that you see then this recognition of the dominant Buck is probably not necessary. On the other hand if you practice selective harvest then recognizing the dominant Bucks can be very important. We know that our property is only going to hold a certain number of Bucks. As the rut approaches the Bucks start establishing their territories. By using our actual observations and trail cameras we can see what Bucks are staying in certain areas of our property. We also know from our pre-season trail camera survey that there are some Bucks with good antlers or good antler potential and there are some Bucks with not so good antlers in our area. As I discussed above the dominant Buck isn't necessarily the Buck with the biggest antlers. We usually have a few Bucks that we and our neighbors determine are cull or management Bucks. These are usually 3 ½ year old and older Bucks that have poor antlers for our area. What we don't like happening is having one of these cull Bucks that happens to be a dominant Buck establishing his territory on our property. When this happens he becomes a high priority harvest for us. Why, you ask? This Buck that has poor antlers may now be keeping one of the other Bucks that had good antlers off of our property. This good Buck may be one that we want to shoot or may be one that we would like to see given another year to grow. But if he isn't spending any time on our property then we obviously don't have any control over the situation. Fortunately we are able to work with our neighbors and we are all aware of these cull Bucks so there's a good chance that this cull Buck will be harvested by one of us.

I often hear some hunters say that they are not going to shoot a Buck unless he has bigger antlers than a previous Buck they shot. I truly respect and understand what they are trying to do and their intentions are good but consider this. What if they are passing up a Buck that is an older, dominant Buck and he just has poor antlers. They may be inadvertently allowing this dominant Buck to control a particular area of their property and he may actually be keeping some bigger antlered Bucks away. Add to the fact that he may pass along his poor antler quality to his offspring then they may actually be doing their area more harm than good. This past season I shot a dominant 4 ½ year old Buck with good antlers early in the season. He had taken over about an eighty acre area of our property. A few days after I shot him a different Buck moved into the area. It actually worked out well because the Buck that moved in was a 3 ½ year old Buck with good antlers and great antler potential. I

got a lot of video of this 3 ½ year old Buck and we know that he survived the season so we're anxious to see what he looks like next season.

In conclusion, with careful observation and possibly the use of trail cameras you may be able to determine which Bucks are the dominant Bucks in your area. Knowing this just might influence your hunt group on which Bucks should be harvested. Many hunters don't even think about the possibility that a particular Buck may be keeping other Bucks (possibly good antlered Bucks) away from their property. So next time you decide to pass on a Buck because his antlers don't meet your expectations just be careful that this isn't an **older Buck** that may never have big antlers. Considering this just might influence your decision on whether to shoot him or not. If you have not done so already please read my article "*It's all about the Antlers*" where I cover the importance of the age of the Buck versus just the size of the antlers. Also watch my video "*How to Age a Buck on the Hoof*" where I try to show you how to use the Bucks body characteristics to estimate how old he is.